

Lebanon At the Crossroads: Rebuilding an Arab Democracy[†]

By Paul Salem*

Introduction

The assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in a massive car bomb explosion on February 14 of this year triggered a series of changes that are bringing fundamental change to the country. The Syrian army and intelligence services, who have been in Lebanon since June of 1976 have finally left; a country that went through fifteen years of civil war followed by fifteen years of Syrian domination is finally getting a real chance at sovereignty and independence; a nation divided among several religious communities has come together in an unprecedented outpouring of national unity; a population cowed by years of militia rule followed by years of foreign domination has found its strength and its voice in massive demonstrations that reverberated around the world.

Yet, Lebanon still faces many serious challenges. Caught in the middle of a showdown between the United States and Syria, Lebanon hopes to reap the benefits but not pay the cost. Bereft of the larger-than-life Prime Minister who led most of Lebanon's postwar governments and engineered the country's reconstruction and post-war revival, Lebanon is in search of new political leadership. Saddled with a national debt equivalent to about 170% of its GDP, the country is struggling to avoid sliding back into economic collapse and social chaos. Having disarmed most militias after the end of the Lebanese war in 1990, Lebanon still has to negotiate the disarming of Hizbullah and of Palestinian groups in the refugee camps.

The crisis touched off by the Hariri assassination and culminating in Syria's withdrawal was the result of changes in international attitudes toward Lebanon and in domestic Lebanese political dynamics that had been building for several years. To capitalize on these changes, Lebanon will need wise and moderate leadership, a unified vision for domestic political and economic development, and targeted support from the international community. If these can be

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* Paul Salem is a writer and political analyst based in Lebanon. He is the author of *Bitter Legacy: Ideology and Politics in the Arab World* (Syracuse Univ. Press, 1994), the editor of *Conflict Resolution in the Arab World* (American Univ. Press, 1997), and the author of various studies on issues of governance, development and socio-cultural issues in Lebanon and the Arab world. He is the founder and former editor of various periodicals including the *Beirut Review*, the *Lebanon Report* and *Abaad: A Journal of Lebanese and Arab Studies* (in Arabic). He was a contributor to the UNDP Arab Human Development Report and the World Bank's recent study on Governance in the Arab World. He is currently completing a manuscript entitled *Nation, Interrupted: The Troubled Journey of Modern Lebanon*, and working on a manuscript entitled *Essays on the Arab Predicament*. He pursued his undergraduate and graduate studies at Harvard University, receiving his Ph.D. in political science from there in 1987. He taught at the *American University of Beirut* between 1987 and 1999. He is the founder and former director (1989-1999) of the *Lebanese Center for Policy Studies*, Lebanon's leading policy think tank. He is a founding member of several advocacy NGOs in Lebanon including the *Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections*, the *National Coalition for Local Elections*, the *Lebanese Transparency Association*, and the *Lebanese Conflict Resolution Network*. Most recently, he has served as the Director of the Fares Foundation, a Lebanese non-profit charity and development organization. He is currently running for parliament.

achieved, and the above challenges overcome, Lebanon could yet achieve its potential – renewed after a long hiatus – to stand as a regional example of democracy, prosperity, and coexistence in the Middle East.

Six Months that Changed the Country

The underlying conditions for change in Lebanon were set several years ago by two fundamental changes: one was September 11 and the profound changes it brought about in US foreign policy, particularly toward the Arab and Islamic world; the second occurred a year earlier with the death of long-time Syrian President Hafez al-Assad and the succession of his less-gifted son Bashar to the presidency. The former event would soon propel the United States directly into Middle East politics; the latter would mean that there was not a wise and prudent head in charge in Damascus to understand and absorb the new US dynamic and to avoid a losing confrontation with it.

The immediate causes of the dramatic changes in Lebanon go back to the summer of last year. Prime Minister Hariri had dominated the political scene in Lebanon since his first assumption of office in 1992. The Syrians initially had mixed feelings about him: he promised economic and social stability for a country that they sought to control, and his appointment with their approval in 1992 and beyond gained them points with the Saudis, Americans and French. On the other hand, as he accrued greater power, they increasingly saw him as an independent-minded Sunni leader whom they could not control as they controlled most other Lebanese politicians, and whose success could project indirectly into Syria and tantalize the ambitions of a Sunni majority that had been suppressed for more than thirty years by an oppressive Alawi minority.

In 1998, the Syrians supported the army commander, General Emile Lahoud—as per tradition, a Maronite Christian – to assume the presidency. Thus began six years of political confrontation and deadlock between the President and the Prime Minister that stalled government decision-making as well as the economic recovery. The event that precipitated the current political upheaval was the Syrian decision in August 2004, as President Lahoud's term in office was coming to an end, to prevail upon the pliant Lebanese parliament to amend the constitution and extend the President's term for another three years. Using threats and coercion, the Syrians even forced Hariri to move the amendment in the cabinet and vote for it in parliament.

International opposition to Syrian domination of Lebanon, led by France and the United States, had already been growing. The extension of Lahoud's term led to a countermove by France and the United States that produced UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which called for an immediate and total withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon, as well as the disarming of Hizbullah and the return of full sovereignty to the country.

From this moment the confrontation between Syria and the West became increasingly overt. The Syrians reacted angrily to UNSCR 1559; they accused Hariri of being behind it, and pressed their allies in Lebanon to denounce the resolution as an illegitimate interference in consensual affairs between Lebanon and Syria. An indication of the escalating level of tension emerged with the attempted assassination of Deputy Marwan Hamadeh in early October in a car bomb attack; Hamadeh was a close ally both of Hariri and the Druze leader Walid Junblatt who had also thrown his political weight behind the demand for a Syrian withdrawal. Hamadeh

miraculously survived the attack, but the event signaled a showdown and unleashed long pent-up frustrations. The attack on Hamadeh in turn helped crystallize the emerging anti-Syrian coalition among leading opposition politicians, and the assassination of Rafiq Hariri on February 14, 2005, came as these battle lines were becoming clear.

The reaction to Hariri's assassination was a cathartic outpouring of grief and unity among the population. After Hariri's assassination the Syrians' position in Lebanon was no longer tenable. While they had previously had a difficult time controlling elements of the Christian opposition, now they had also lost control of the Sunni and Druze communities as well. Anti-Syrian demonstrations in Beirut on March 14 brought 1.2 million people onto the streets, almost a third of the country's population.

Only the large Shiite community stayed out of the oppositionist fanfare and close to the Syrians. Among the Shiites, Hizbullah was opposed to 1559 because it aimed to disarm it; and the Amal movement was opposed to it, because their leader, Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, derived most of his political power from Syria and was likely to lose it if they left. In addition, the Shiites had always been somewhat wary of resurgent Sunni power in the country, led by Hariri, and hence reacted differently to the assassination. A pro-Syrian demonstration organized by Hizbullah on March 7 brought out about half a million people.

Some analysts mistakenly argue that the assassination of Hariri led to the Syrian withdrawal; it is more accurate to say that *because* the Syrian position in Lebanon had become impossible to sustain, Hariri was assassinated. While Syria dominated Lebanon, they could always keep Hariri in check; if they had to leave, he would quickly increase in power and then, through his regional and international alliances, would be able to project the specter of Sunni power into an embattled Damascus. In one blow, with the assassination of Hariri, the Sunni community could be temporarily, but seriously, orphaned and crippled.

It proved to be a massive miscalculation. Syria has now been forced by a unique combination of popular, international, and Arab pressures to undertake a military and intelligence withdrawal from Lebanon. It has accepted 1559 and accepted that, for the time being at least, it must cease its direct interference in Lebanese affairs. There is a growing sense in Syria that the regime has overplayed its hand and committed several strategic mistakes that have brought the threat of confrontation with the United States to the regime's doorstep. They hope that by pulling out of Lebanon, they will be able to gain international good will. However, while the battle yesterday was for domination of Lebanon, the real question today regards the survival of the Assad regime itself.

Whither Lebanon?

Lebanon today is in the midst of decisive parliamentary elections; however, there has been great discord over the election law and over electoral alliances. Before the assassination of Hariri, the government at the time had proposed an election law featuring small electoral districts; this was favored by the Christian opposition. However, this law was never passed in parliament, and attempts to pass it later failed. Consequently, the country had to fall back on the 2000 election law that was on the books which features large districts; these large districts were favored by Amal and Hizbullah, and, as it turned out, by the Hariri bloc and Junblatt as well, in addition to some members of the Christian opposition. The problem with these large districts is that the results of the election are determined more by the formation of coalition lists, than by

voter choice; once a strong list has been assembled, it generally will sweep all the seats in that particular district. The continuation of this election law, which had been drawn up under Syrian patronage in 2000, was seen among the general public as a negative first step in newly independent Lebanon, and as an attempt by the political class to hang together and preserve its interests in the face of potential democratic change.

Also, the turbulent and short election season has mixed up political alliances in the country. The opposition that faced the Syrians together included the Hariri bloc, Junblatt, several Christian parties and leaders, as well as exiled General Michel Aoun, and a number of leftist parties. During the election season, Muslim-Christian unity which had been greatly cemented in the demonstrations leading up to March 14, was shaken by accusations made by the Maronite Patriarch, that Muslim leaders were trying to hand-pick Christian candidates. Opposition unity was also shaken by accusations that, while they all publicly supported the small-district election law, many of them secretly favored the continuation of the old large-district law. It was also shaken by disagreements between Michel Aoun, who returned to Lebanon in early May after fifteen years in exile, and other members of the opposition who were wary of giving Aoun too much room or too many seats in the new parliament.

Nevertheless, the elections will take place over four Sundays, between May 29 and June 19. They will bring an overwhelming majority of deputies opposed to Syrian influence. The main blocs in parliament will be, in order of size, a Hariri bloc, a Junblatt bloc, a Hizbullah bloc, an Amal bloc, and blocs for Aoun, the Lebanese Forces (the Christian former militia), and the Lebanese Kataib Party. Although Amal and Hizbullah were on the pro-Syrian side in the recent standoff, they have been in alliance with Hariri and Junblatt during the elections. Exactly what alliance patterns will emerge among the various blocs after the elections is yet to be seen.

Among the main issues immediately facing the new parliament is whether to abrogate the two years left of President Lahoud's term and elect a new president. With a two-thirds majority in parliament, this can be done by amending the constitution to cancel the extension that was granted him in 2004. The issue then would be whom to elect to the presidency. There are several candidates for this position, including Aoun and various other Maronite politicians some allied with Hariri and others members of the Christian opposition coalition known as Qornet Shehwan. A second key issue is whether to reelect Amal leader Nabih Berri as Speaker of Parliament or choose someone else; there is widespread sentiment that Berri, who has served throughout the post-war period, has been too embroiled in corruption and has not developed parliament into an effective and democratic institution.

The upcoming contests for the posts of president and speaker of parliament are fairly open; the race for the prime ministership is much more restricted. The Prime Minister's post had been dominated by Rafiq Hariri; consequently, the Hariri family and their large political following now will have the primary say in who occupies this post. The family has named his second son, Saadeddine, to carry on his father's political role; he may choose to be Prime Minister, or he might name someone from their bloc to occupy the post.

In any case, much will depend on the successful leadership and cooperation between the new President and Prime Minister, and the new (or old) Speaker of Parliament. There is much to be done in Lebanon in terms of reinforcing the sovereignty of the state, the dominance of the Lebanese armed forces after the Syrian withdrawal, the restructuring of Lebanon's international relations, the development of Lebanon's democracy, the implementation of necessary internal reforms, and the re-launching of the Lebanese economy. The country will also be awaiting the results of the International Investigative Commission that was set up by UNSCR 1595 that is

tasked with finding out the truth about the assassination of Hariri. The investigation might reach high up into both the Lebanese and Syrian political and security superstructures, with dramatic and unpredictable consequences.

Immediate attention, as well, must be paid to the issue of Hizbullah and its potential disarmament, as required in UNSCR 1559, alongside the question of what to do about the armed Palestinian groups in the refugee camps. All this must be done in an environment of continued tension and uncertainty with regard to US-Syrian tensions, US-Iranian relations, and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Lebanon has been given a great opportunity by regaining its independence and sovereignty. It has the potential to make great strides toward building a truly democratic, free, and prosperous society. But, as a small and still somewhat segmented country in a turbulent environment, its path forward weaves through a minefield.

What has Changed?

A number of important changes have taken place over the recent months.

1. The international environment has changed dramatically. Syrian control of Lebanon since 1990 had been indirectly condoned by the United States who had needed Syria at the time during the construction of its Arab coalition against Iraq in the first Gulf War. France, Europe and most of the Arab world had gone along with this arrangement as the most handy solution to the seemingly endless Lebanese war. After the death of Hafiz al-Assad, after September 11, and most recently after the assassination of Rafiq Hariri, Syria lost the regional and international acceptance for its role in Lebanon that it had once enjoyed, while Lebanon has reemerged as the subject of intense Arab, European and American interest. Whereas Lebanon in 1990 was an open wound that somebody needed to patch up; Lebanon in 2005 represents something quite different to the international community. For the Bush administration, the independence and success of Lebanon is now seen as an important feather in the cap of Bush's freedom and democratization 'vision' for the Middle East; for France, liberating Lebanon brings back a historic friend of France on the eastern Mediterranean; for Saudi Arabia, other Gulf states, Egypt, Jordan and other Sunni Arab countries, pushing the Alawi regime out of Lebanon is partly in retaliation for the assassination of Hariri, who after all was also a Sunni and a Saudi citizen, and partly to create balances in light of the eclipse of Sunni power by Shiite power in Iraq. Lebanon, today, has a dramatically different value and meaning in regional and international affairs than it did only a few years ago.
2. The international changes have also affected Hizbullah directly. Without Syrian political and military cover, Hizbullah's supply lines of money and materiel from Iran have been seriously jeopardized. Also, after the Israeli withdrawal from South Lebanon in May 2000, Hizbullah has been having an increasingly hard time justifying its continued possession of weapons to the wider Lebanese public. The head of Hizbullah, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, has been very active over the past weeks reaching out to all sides in the Lebanese political scene and trying to find a path and a place for Hizbullah in the new Lebanon. Most Lebanese are still respectful and friendly to Hizbullah, as they credit it with pushing the Israelis out of Lebanon and they credit it with not abusing its power as other militias had done

in the past. Hizbullah has remained a very professional group that has not become openly associated with corruption, smuggling or mafia-style behavior as most war-time militias did. Most Lebanese, therefore, make a distinction between the two main clauses of UNSCR 1559: they wholeheartedly supported an immediate Syrian withdrawal under international pressure; but with regard to the disarming of Hizbullah, they prefer that this be done in a cooperative and gradual manner in full consultation with Hizbullah and as part of a Lebanese process not a process imposed or forced by the United States or the United Nations. There are two issues closely related to the Hizbullah disarmament issue: the first is that most Shiites in the South remember that the PLO and other armed Palestinian groups largely ruled South Lebanon between the late 1960s and 1982; they fear a return to such a situation if Hizbullah precipitously disarms without strong military and political guarantees against a re-deployment of Palestinian—predominantly Sunni—armed groups from the camps into the South. Second, many Shiites as well as other Lebanese believe that Hizbullah, after having pushed the Israelis out of Lebanon, is a main deterrent against any future Israeli attacks or invasions of South Lebanon. They fear that if Hizbullah is disarmed, the Lebanese state and army would not be willing or capable of retaliating or inflicting any noticeable deterrent punishment on Israel. Nevertheless, Hizbullah, which has been a main player in postwar Lebanon, is facing dramatic new conditions in the post-Syrian era, and is looking for ways to move forward. It is likely that there will have to be intensive regional and international efforts in order to achieve a gradual disarmament of Hizbullah, along with a significant change in the situation of armed groups in the Palestinian camps, as well as some form of progress on the Arab-Israeli peace process.

3. Rafiq Hariri, who was the main political and economic leader in the post-war period, is gone. Hariri had many supporters and many detractors, but there was no denying that he was the main engine of the post-war period. With him gone, Lebanon has lost a clear and powerful leadership; it must fall back on its republican past and find ways to supplant his personal leadership with a more collective, yet effective, form of cooperative and collective leadership.
4. The political class is going through a period of significant flux. The politicians that constitute the political class today are the mixed result of fifteen years of war followed by fifteen years of Syrian control. Many will soon disappear from the political scene, others will have to quickly adapt to the new realities, and some newcomers will emerge. All politicians will have to move away from the Syrian-brokered habits of the past and find ways to build national coalitions without help or obstruction from abroad.
5. They will also have to deal with another major change which is the awakening and empowerment of the people. Most of the Lebanese population had been beaten into fear, disillusionment and passivity by the fifteen years of war and fifteen years of foreign domination. However, the assassination of Hariri and the international community's stand against the Syrian presence triggered an explosion of emotion and will-power among most Lebanese. The demonstrations of March 14 brought out a third of the entire population of the country. Such a ratio of public participation occurs only rarely in history. The population has

reemerged as a potent force in political life and the political class will have to take account of their demands in the months and years to come.

What Has Remained the Same?

Despite all the major changes taking place, there are many elements of stability and continuity, among them the following:

1. Unlike in Iraq, where a shift in external power brought about a fundamental change in the regime, state institutions and society, the changes in Lebanon are taking place within the context of constitutional and institutional continuity. The Lebanese constitution has been in force (with only minor suspensions under the French during World War II) since its writing in 1926. Fundamental amendments were made only twice: in 1943 to eliminate the clauses relating to the French Mandate, and in 1990 to introduce changes in the communal power-sharing formula agreed upon in the war-ending Taif Agreement of 1989. There have been regular parliamentary elections since 1927, except during the Lebanese War of 1975-1990, and fairly orderly transfers of executive power, despite the extension of the president's term twice in the post-war period, in 1995 and 2004. In addition, the military and civilian institutions of the state have existed and developed since the French Mandate era—even though their reach was dramatically circumscribed during the Lebanese War. Lebanon has had the institutions and political culture of statehood and cooperative electoral-based government for many decades. Although Lebanon faces much change, it is not embarked on some brand new political adventure or experiment, but rather reinforcing institutions and behavior patterns that it already has.
2. One of the elements that saw Lebanese society through the fifteen years of war without the dramatic collapse that we have seen in Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan and elsewhere, is a strong and vibrant civil society. Lebanon never had a totalitarian state unlike many other states in the region, hence its civil society developed steadily throughout the 20th century. Although Lebanese civil society is a mix of rather traditional communally-based associations as well as more modern and democratic-oriented civic groups, both types of associations and institutions provide a rich web of intermediate institutions, organizations and networks that provide strength and durability to the society even at times when the state is in great flux or has all but disappeared. This is one of the sources of Lebanon's strength and survival even in the most difficult of times.
3. One of the major elements of continuity and stability is the Lebanese Army. This army is still the center of much national identification and pride. Although it suffered divisions during the war, the Army was reunited after the war, and since almost all families have one or more of their extended family members in the army, it is a national institution that most people identify with directly. While the political class and the intelligence services got involved deeply in the political and security manipulation by Syria during the past fifteen years, the army was partly kept out of the process and was instead accorded standard military and security-keeping functions. During the recent confrontations between the government and the opposition, the army quietly took a moderate position, not openly disobeying government orders, but at the same time not clashing with opposition demonstrators and often looking the other way in order to facilitate their gatherings. Although the Army is no match for any of its neighbors, it is a strong force in

terms of internal security. It is the largest and strongest institution in the state and society, and is functioning as a pillar of stability and transitional security in the current period.

4. With regard to external relations, although Lebanon is thrilled to be rid of the Syrian military and intelligence presence, most Lebanese still agree that it is in Lebanon's interest to maintain close relations with Syria. The Lebanese understand that they have many common interests with Syria; but more importantly, they realize that if they drift into policies or alliances that are hostile to Syria they are likely to pay a very high price. Mainly this means that the Lebanese are largely agreed that they are not willing to pursue separate peace talks with Israel, if Syria is not going along as well. After the Israeli withdrawal of 2000, Lebanon does not have any major territorial disagreements with Israel except the minor issue of the Shebaa Farms on the Lebanese, Syrian, Israeli border. Syria, on the other hand has the entire Golan Heights to reclaim. Lebanon cannot afford to move ahead with separate peace talks with Israel and risk seriously angering Syria. Indeed, most Lebanese feel that, given how many times other Arab countries have accused Lebanon or Lebanese of treason, Lebanon is happy to be among the last in line of Arab countries signing peace with Israel.

Prospects for Stability, Democracy, Good Governance and Prosperity

Lebanon is currently enjoying a high level of internal unity. A thirty-year Syrian presence has come to an end. Following on Israel's withdrawal in 2000, Lebanon now has the opportunity to be sovereign in all its territory. A coalition of Arab and Western countries is keen to help Lebanon reinforce its sovereignty and take firm steps toward rebuilding its democracy and economy. The reasons for the outbreak of war in 1975 are no longer present; and the country has most of the institutions that would enable it to develop a well-functioning state, democracy and economy. Lebanon is facing a historic opportunity to move forward. For the first time in many years, the future of Lebanon is in Lebanese hands again.

The challenge now largely falls on the political leadership that will take the lead in the coming months. Will they have the vision and skills to reinforce national unity, develop state and democratic institutions, institute necessary reforms, and kick-start the economy? Will the population and civil society maintain the pressure on the political class to deliver necessary unity, reform and change? Or will Lebanon fall victim to political bickering and division, as it has on several occasions in its recent history, and lose this historic opportunity?

It is difficult to predict the answers to these key questions, as the country moves toward decisive parliamentary elections followed by decisive elections for the presidency, the prime ministership, and perhaps the speakership of parliament. The new leaders of tomorrow's Lebanon, most of whom are in the opposition today, will have to avoid falling into old patterns of division and disagreement. They will have to make a concerted effort to develop a shared program of reforms and policy initiatives in order to take advantage of the power shift that is taking place. They must do more than just kick the Syrians and their allies out of power; they must bring meaningful and useful change to the country.

Two main potential sources of instability in the coming period relate to Syria and South Lebanon, respectively. With regard to the former, if US-Syrian tensions continue to escalate and turn into pressures for regime change, a cornered Syria might lash out in Lebanon as well as elsewhere. Lebanon could scarce guard against the repercussions of such lashing out. Also, if

the Syrian regime is overthrown, Lebanon would also bear the consequences: it is conceivable that a change of regime might be achieved through a quick *coup d'état* that does not lead to a breakdown of order; but it is perhaps more likely that a change of regime might be accompanied and followed by a breakdown of law and order and near civil war, along the Iraqi model. This would be a dangerous if not disastrous scenario for Lebanon, given the proximity and interconnectedness of the two countries.

With regard to South Lebanon, Lebanon has to find a way to deal with Hizbullah, the armed Palestinian groups, and Israel. UNSCR 1559 calls for the disarming of all non-government armed groups in Lebanon which includes Hizbullah and the Palestinian armed groups. This can only be achieved through intensive and delicate negotiations involving Hizbullah, the Palestinian leadership, as well as Iran, the United States, and indirectly, Israel.

Assuming that these two risk areas do not cause major security eruptions, Lebanon is likely to move in a positive direction. The removal of the Syrian domination of the country, is likely to lead, almost by definition, to increased sovereignty and better democracy. This in itself is likely to lead to a significant improvement in governance. There is much that needs to be done to enhance the benefits of this opportunity, but the general direction of change in this regard will probably be positive, even without major visionary leadership.

On the economic level, although Lebanon will continue to struggle with a massive debt burden, these changes in sovereignty, freedom, and governance can only have a positive effect on Lebanese, Arab and foreign investment in the country and on the prospects for economic growth. Even in the difficult circumstances of the past, Lebanon achieved stunning strides in rebuilding the country after the war and in re-establishing a place for itself as an emerging hub of regional tourism and services. If this could be achieved under Syrian occupation, it is likely that much more can be done without it, even if its main architect, Rafiq Hariri, is no longer present.

The Role of the United States and the International Community

When all is said and done, the fact is that it was mainly the United States that pushed Syria out of Lebanon. Although Hariri may have been behind the idea for UNSCR 1559, and that he might have persuaded French President Chirac to engineer it, the fact is that had Chirac not convinced President Bush, and had the Bush Administration not provided the power to back it up, Syria would have been able to ignore the resolution.

While Lebanese are grateful to the United States, France, the United Nations, Saudi Arabia, and the international community for prevailing on Syria to get out of Lebanon, they are very concerned that Lebanon might break loose of one foreign domination only to end up under another. The examples of US-managed governments in Afghanistan or Iraq are neither appealing nor successful. Lebanon is a complex and delicate country. The United States should be careful not to overplay its hand, and not to interpret the ease with which Syria left the country as equivalent to the ease with which the United States could get directly involved in the country.

The United States, as well as Europe, the United Nations and the rest of the international and Arab community, should follow up their effective liberation of Lebanon with strong encouragement for Lebanon to reconstitute a strong, sovereign, and democratic state. The international community should help this new state rebuild its institutions and restart its struggling economy. Lebanon has the institutions and individuals to carry out these tasks, and the international community can successfully support an indigenous process. With regard to Hizbullah, which is the main US and UN-related demand of international concern within

Lebanon, this should be done gradually and diplomatically. Lebanese understand that this issue cannot be postponed indefinitely, but the international community must understand that it cannot be achieved overnight and that it is connected to issues relating to the Palestinians, Israelis and Iranians. It must be said that both US and UN diplomats have been very balanced in their recent approach to these thorny issues, and have exhibited understanding of their complexities.

It would seem that after decades of division, domination and distress, Lebanon might finally be on the path to sovereignty, unity, democracy and development. The country has benefited greatly from the support of the international community. Further support should see Lebanon consolidate the historic opportunity that is before it and move toward a better future. Lebanon can then recapture its role as an example of democracy, prosperity and religious coexistence that is of great importance not only within the Arab and Islamic worlds, but within the international community as well.